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ABSTRACT

An integrated approach to teaching English composition to undergraduate students in Indian universities is proposed. The integration in approach is realized in terms of an onward progression from the first to the third year of the degree course. The idea of an integrated approach (viewing the sentence and the paragraph in an integrated manner) can be realized through the adoption of two teaching strategies. The first strategy, dealing with the sentence, is called "meristic" and the second, dealing with the paragraph, is called "holistic." The meristic approach seeks to equip the student with an ability to grasp the mechanics of expression, while the holistic approach is aimed at facilitating an understanding and control of the nature and processes of paragraph organization. It is suggested that a composition instructional program at the undergraduate level necessitates a meristic approach in the initial stages and a holistic approach at an advanced level. It is further suggested that the theory of discourse be introduced at the holistic level. At the advanced level, the students will be able to understand and appreciate the distinct organizational formats and grammatical components of the various types of discourse. (SW)

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Theory of Discourse and the Teaching of English Composition to Undergraduate Students

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1. 0. Introduction

I propose to discuss the notion of an integrated approach to the teaching of composition at the undergraduate level. The integration in approach is realized in terms of an onward progression from the first to the third year of the degree course in the Indian universities. I intend to view the teaching of composition in the context of the total teaching of English, i.e., from the ability to manipulate a sentence or sentences to the ability to organize paragraphs in meaningful units. The paragraphs or meaningful units constitute a well-developed composition on a given topic. The idea of an integrated approach (wherein the sentence and the paragraph are viewed in an integrated manner) can be realized in the adoption of two teaching strategies aimed at enabling efficiency at two levels: the sentence and the paragraph. The first strategy is called *meristic*, whereas the second, dealing with the paragraph, is called *holistic* (Ekmekci, 1971).

The adoption of holistic strategy in the teaching of composition presupposes teacher-awareness of the theory of discourse and the manner in which it should be utilized in the teaching of composition.

2.0 The State of the Teaching of Composition

Students' control of language elements is often taken for granted in the teaching of composition. The emphasis in such teaching is laid on thought content and its organization. The teacher introduces a topic, writes an outline on the blackboard with or without student-participation, and the students are expected to develop the theme into a full-fledged composition. Oral activity as a preparatory step to composition-writing, reading comprehension, conscious effort at vocabulary expansion or increased control of

linguistic and discourse structures are often not stressed in the actual classroom teaching. Memorizing composition is often a by-product of such teaching; conscious organization of composition is almost non-existent.

An error-analysis of students' compositions (Bhatia, 1974) revealed the following areas of errors:

Errors at the Level of Mechanics of Expression

		Total Occurrence	No. of Errors	Percentage
(i)	Verb forms and Tense Sequences	310	125	40
(ii)	Articles	176	70	40
(iii)	Subject-Verb Agreement	180	36	20
(iv)	Prepositions	230	40	17
(v)	Modifiers	184	26	14
(vi)	Pronominals	170	8	5
(vii)	Plurals	380	18	5
(viii)	Failure to give a verb to each clause	210	15	5

Errors at the Level of Organization

(i)	Originality	10	10	100
(ii)	Adequate Development	10	10	100
(iii)	Clarity of Construction	10	7	70
(iv)	Relevance	10	3	30
(v)	Order	10	3	30

The incidence of errors analysed above indicates the importance of teaching language skills in a manner that they carry the students beyond grammar and beyond drills, i.e., writing connected discourse. The teaching of writing has to be so sequenced in our instructional programme that the students can control both the sentence and the paragraph. The acquisition of writing skill involves such activities as putting down the graphic symbols (that represent a language one understands): the presentation of information in an acceptable manner at the levels of sentence and paragraph, and the expression of purposeful information. Three different abilities are expected of the student: the ability to shape the letters of the alphabet (graphics), knowledge of right combinations of letters (spelling), and skill in expressing oneself through the written word at the level of the sentence and the paragraph (composition). [Mackey, 1967]. It is in the acquisition of the last

ability (the ability to express) that the meristic and holistic strategies play a useful role.

3. 0. **Writing as a Skill**

The problems faced by students writing in English as a first language are different from those encountered by students writing in English as a second language. The concern of the native/first language speaker is with the elements of thought, logic and stylistics (the higher components of expression), whereas the second-language student needs to pay more attention to the elements of language (known as "mechanics of expression") beginning from phonology and going upto the syntactic level. Organization and stylistics come next in order. In a second-language learning situation, the initial ability in the writing skill—to spell—often takes a long time to acquire. "The ability to spell is an initial activity without which the learner cannot make much progress. The ability to express oneself is the ultimate goal in teaching writing" (Bhatia and Bhatia, 1973, p. 19). The higher components of expression—thought, logic, and stylistics—are often acquired at a very advanced stage in formal learning.

Research in language learning/teaching has usually indicated a continuum in which the skills are acquired/learnt. There is thus an order of acquisition (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and also a set of relationships between two skills. The continuum operates across various skills and within each skill. Writing as expression is preceded by several other aspects as spelling, correct structures, and the ability to manipulate these structures in organized paragraphs. The graphic nature of reading and writing suggests a possible relationship between the two skills; this skill often facilitates mutual reinforcement. As a service activity, writing helps to consolidate learning in the other skill areas (Rivers, 1968).

Research studies indicate, however, that instruction in formal grammar has little or no effect on the quality of student compositions (Braddock, *et al* 1963). Writing is much more than an orthographic symbolization of speech; it is a purposive selection and organization of experience. Teaching the students to write is thus different in a very important way from teaching them to speak or to use grammar. Writing requires "active thought" and the process of learning writing is largely a process of learning to think more clearly. Praninskas, 1965; Arapoff, 1967, 1969; Carr, 1967; Robert Kaplan, 1967, 1968, Ruth Kaplan, 1969—all lay emphasis on unity in writing. Written pattern practice alone does not prepare the students for composition writing. "Prose style" needs to be distinguished from "conversational style". "Prose

style sentences are more precise and express relationships which are more complex than those expressed by single sentences in speech" (Praninskas, 1965). The teaching of writing does not end with the use of grammatically correct sentences; it consists of getting students *to compose*, of getting them to put grammatical sentences together in such a way that they form a coherent unit, a written discourse (Arapoff, 1969).

It has been suggested by several scholars that students should be taught to read before they are taught to write. This is intended to enable them to understand how sentences are put together and how they form a coherent whole. It is in this context that a distinction is made between "composition exercises" and "sentence-building exercises". The emphasis in composition exercises is laid on an understanding of logic and organization, while in sentence-building exercises, the focus is on words, word-order, and structures (Carr, 1967).

A teaching strategy which stresses sentence-building as a primary activity in the teaching of writing can be classified as 'meristic'. The sequence of progression here is from writing sentences to writing paragraphs to writing full-length compositions, in that order. It is in the 'holistic' strategy that the emphasis is laid on teaching composition as a unit related to a given model. Ideas are sought to be logically arranged and students are asked to organize them in paragraphs and essay patterns (Carr, 1967). The emphasis, is on the larger whole, rather than on individual words, phrases and sentences. Under this approach, competence in grammar and competence in writing are not synonymous, nor is learning to control the grammar the key to learning to write. The control of grammar is still an essential requirement, though. Competence in writing is actually evinced by the writer's ability to produce sentences and paragraphs in "context" (Arapoff, 1969).

4. 0. **The Meristic Approach**

This approach entails three steps in writing composition: copying, dictation, and controlled composition.

4. 1. **Copying**

Students' skill in mechanical writing can be developed in the initial stages through copying of known words and expressions from the blackboard and printed text, or through copying of a good model "in order to draw students' attention to graphic elements such as silent letters and verb endings" (Cornfield, 1966), or through transcription of printed text.

4. 2. Dictation

Dictation should, at first, be based on previously studied material and then on unfamiliar material. Dictation as an exercise can consist of such activities as oral-repetition, memory-writing, sentence-completion, transliteration, spelling tests, writing of a phrase as a response to a question the teacher asks or as a description of a picture he shows, and spot-dictation which involves a fill-in procedure, i.e., passages with several blanks are given and students are asked to fill them in as the teacher reads aloud the whole passage (Cornfield, 1966; Grittner, 1969). Dictation facilitates training in handwriting, spelling and oral or listening comprehension. Above all, it forces the student "into an awareness of his comprehension errors, phonological or grammatical or both....Most important of all, he is forced to correct the errors he makes" (Sawyer and Silver, 1972, p. 227).

4. 3. Controlled Composition

A controlled composition, according to Olivia (1969), is one which the teacher has carefully prepared and structured in such a way that the students must use particular grammar and lexical items. The idea of controlled composition implies a situation wherein the teacher helps the students in various ways to produce a correct composition. Thus a teacher plays a very active part in the planning of a controlled composition programme. The teacher can provide controls in the form of topic, organizational pattern, structural pattern or vocabulary. The desired goal here is to create a situation "in which a student cannot make a serious error if he follows directions" (Robinson, 1965).

Substitution conversion exercises (in the grammatical categories of gender, tense, number and person), transformation conversion exercises (such as change from direct to indirect form of discourse, passive to active, etc.), integration, reduction, and slot-substitution exercises (Paulston, 1972) are some types of controlled writing. The controlled composition can also be attempted in the form of role assumption, directed and cued narration with cues on which sentences are to be constructed, and parallel writing which requires the imitation of a model passage with some carefully defined variation.

Lado (1964) and Finocchiaro (1967) suggest a classroom technique of control. The blackboard can be divided into three parts: the teacher writing the suggested ideas on a given topic in the first section, listing those in a logical order in the second section and writing the required lexical items and structures in the third. Students can then be asked to write one or two

sentences on each of these ideas. Bhatia and Bhatia (1973, p. 24) suggest that exercises in controlled composition should be relevant and meaningful.

"The teaching of guided composition should be largely based on the teaching of materials already familiar to the students, textbooks on short story, play or prose. The teacher can plan a series of comprehension questions based on paragraph units or thought units ..After questions on one paragraph have been completed, the teacher can ask his students to write some comments on the character, event or idea just discussed in the comprehension questions".

The meristic approach aims at equipping the students with two skills—control of mechanics of expression and an awareness of paragraph organization—in that order. The use of models for creating an awareness of paragraph organization provides an appropriate "take off" point at which instruction in aims and modes of discourse can be initiated.

5. 0. **The Holistic Approach**

The aim of teaching composition, according to the holistic approach, should be to lead the students beyond grammar and beyond drills to an analytical study of model discourse-paragraphs.

A paragraph is representative of a thought unit expressed in language. Such a unit may be complete in itself or a sub-unit of a larger thought unit. The organization of such sub-units then will represent a sequential and developing arrangement of the whole thought unit. The sequential and developing nature of thoughts can be explained in terms of discourse analysis ; the sequential part deals with formulation of sentences while the developing part of it implies organization of paragraphs within a given piece of writing.

The holistic approach involves progression from reading comprehension to semi-controlled composition and finally to free composition. Writing is related to reading ; reading comprehension is considered a prerequisite to production, both controlled and free.

5. 1. **Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension must play as vital a role in writing as listening does in oral production. Reading comprehension exercises can be combined with grammatical composition (Robinson, 1965). All the sentences in the model composition are changed into questions (without use of question words) and the students are then asked to change the whole passage into statements. The students are likely to acquire an insight into the syntactic

and ideational aspects of the model passage. Writing here is viewed as a unit integrating elements such as syntax, semantics and composition. At a later stage, students can be asked to add 'either' or adverbs like 'although' and 'until' while changing the questions into statements. A final exercise can be that of changing paragraphs according to a given set of patterns. Thus the grammar used in the structure of each sentence in the paragraph becomes a tool in writing composition.

Arapoff (1969) recommends the "discover and transform" method wherein the student first reads and then analyses two written models, similar in content but different in form and thereby gains an understanding of the grammatical and semantic rules that operate to transform the first model into the second. Later, the student demonstrates his competence by applying the newly-discovered transform rules to a fresh model.

Writing can also be viewed as a 'thinking process' (Arapoff, 1967), where the students are called upon to select and organize the thoughts, facts, opinions or ideas they have acquired through perception or hearing, experience or reading. This 'thinking process' can again be developed through a series of exploratory questions in a reading comprehension exercise. In the earlier stages the students should learn to pick out the topic-sentence or main ideas of the paragraph. On more advanced levels they should be taught to extract the central idea or the thesis of an essay. Reading should continue to be analyzed till the students begin to perceive the organizational pattern the author has used to express his ideas. Reading then serves as a model for composition. Composing a paragraph following a specific model reinforces the reading comprehension of the paragraph which served as the model (Carr, 1967).

In a reading comprehension exercise, deliberate steps need to be taken in teaching logical relationships and alerting the students to signals or logical devices such as 'but' indicating contrast, 'also' indicating parallel idea, 'therefore' signifying inference, etc. (Horn, 1969). The first step would consist of presenting pairs of sentences illustrating each of the relationships. The next step would be to help students identify such relationships in paragraphs and mark the relationship in the margin.

A reading comprehension exercise is aimed at developing students' ability to analyse themes from the point of view of their subject matter, ideas and organizational pattern through a study of model discourse paragraphs.

5. 2. Semi-controlled Composition

Unlike controlled composition wherein the degree of vocabulary and structural control is extensive, in semi-controlled composition the teacher exerts less control and the students have more freedom. A common procedure is to present the students with a model passage, or a brief story or an essay, and ask them to paraphrase it, or to write a summary or precis of it, or to add a beginning, middle or end to it, or to write a composition on a similar topic, as in the model passage, or they may be given an outline and asked to write a composition from it.

5. 3. Free Composition

Free composition involves writing on a given topic, the students having complete freedom in the matter of choice and arrangement of details. Sometimes students can select their own topics and develop their own ideas. However, such total freedom, in an undergraduate programme, should be given only to the exceptionally proficient students. As often as possible, topics should be relevant to the student-world, their peer groups and family relations, their social and cultural interests. Topics should be varied and induce creativity and inventiveness on the pa t of the students. Free composition is the ultimate goal in a programme of teaching writing in a second language. Free composition, however, is advised only for those students who have complete control of structures and vocabulary.

6. 0. The Theory of Discourse

It was stated in the initial stages of the paper that the teacher needs to acquire familiarity with the theory of discourse. This familiarity should be manifested in his knowledge for himself and in his use of the theory in the classroom in a manner that it does not appear too theoretical. In planning a composition teaching programme, it is essential to discuss the theory of discourse with its aims and modes and the application of these to teaching.

Kinneavy (1971) offers a comprehensive view on the subject. He lists four aims of discourse : referential, persuasive, literary and expressive. He uses the term 'reference' to cover scientific (inductive and deductive themes), informative and exploratory discourse. He has discussed each of these aims in terms of its logic, rules, attributes, and organization pattern, and in terms of its discourse, semantic and grammatical components. The modes of discourse are narrative, descriptive, evaluative and classificatory. An understanding of the basic principles of narration, classification, description and evaluation would help students organize their compositions since modes determine organization. Modes also aid in paragraph development.

Each mode of discourse gives only a partial picture of reality. Thus modes never appear in a pure form. In actual discourse, pure narration never occurs without some description, classification and even some evaluation.

6. 1. Applications in Pedagogy

6. 1. 1. *Developing the Students' Analytical Ability*

Model passages based on different aims and modes of discourse should form one part of the teaching materials relevant to organization. These model passages should be used for developing the analytical ability of students. Students could be made to analyse model discourse passages in terms of their logic, attributes, organization pattern, and in terms of their discourse, grammatical and semantic components. The principal aim here is to acquaint the student with the various characteristics of each aim and mode. Implicit in this activity is the assumption that students will transfer their analytical ability to writing.

Discourse analysis is an important activity in reading comprehension. Thus students could be asked to analyse inductive themes by focusing attention on the subject matter and discussing the probability level of the event or idea, and the validity of the proof provided in the discourse. They could also be asked to discuss the style in which the discourse is written. An informative writing such as a news article, a report or a summary is analysed from the point of view of factuality, content comprehensiveness and surprise value. An exploratory discourse, such as a dialogue or a report on a seminar, conference etc., is analysed by pointing out the inconsistencies, the debatable ideas, the writer's dissatisfaction with the existing premise, and the imposition of the new premise. A persuasive passage, such as an advertisement, a political speech or a religious sermon, can be analysed from the point of redundancy, choice of words, levels of language with different audiences (ethical, pathetic and logical appeal) and from the point of its organization format. Students should be trained to perceive good persuasion from bad persuasion. Examples of expressive discourse are diaries, prayers, and autobiographies at the individual level and declarations, manifestos, petitions, etc. at the social level. Such expressive passages could be analysed from the point of view of the speaking self and his ideas. In analysing any discourse passage, components of narrative, descriptive, classificatory and evaluative modes could be discussed.

Although deductive and literary discourse are important in a complete composition teaching programme, the present writer does not recommend the inclusion of these in an undergraduate teaching programme.

6.1.2 *Production*

Once the analytical ability of the students is developed, production should become an easier exercise. Again, production should be controlled and based on given models or cues. Students could be given a topic / theme and asked to write an inductive article, or they could be given some information and asked to write an informative theme based on it, e.g., university life, the shopping world, job requirements in India. Or they could be asked to suppose a situation and develop a theme on it (exploratory discourse). Students could also be asked to write persuasive discourse on themes related to religious, social and political situations in India. At the expressive level, students could be trained to write brief autobiographical pieces, make entries in diaries or chalk out petitions and requests to college or university authorities.

7.0 Conclusion

Both the meristic and holistic approaches suggested in this paper are very specific in their operation. The meristic approach, as already stated, seeks to equip the students with an ability to grasp the mechanics of expression, while the holistic approach is aimed at facilitating an understanding and control of the nature and processes of paragraph organization. A composition teaching programme at the undergraduate level necessitates a meristic approach in the initial stages and a holistic approach at an advanced level. Within the two approaches, the point at which instruction in writing should begin could be determined by the teacher's awareness of students' prior competence in the language skills. It is further suggested that the theory of discourse be introduced at the holistic level. It is only at an advanced level that the students will be able to understand and appreciate the distinct organizational formats and discourse and grammatical components of the various types of discourse.

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